

Committee and date  
Development Services  
Scrutiny Committee

3 June 2010

5.00 pm

Item No

**9B**

Public

## RURAL HIGHWAYS CONDITION IN SOUTHERN SHROPSHIRE

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### Summary

This report sets out the Council's response to the concerns of Craven Arms and Rural Local Joint Committee regarding the perceived deterioration in the condition of rural highways in Southern Shropshire.

### Recommendation

Scrutiny Committee discusses the report and pass any comments to the Corporate Director.

## Report

### Background

1. The report has been produced in response to concerns raised by the Craven Arms and Rural LJC about the condition of rural highways in South Shropshire.
2. The report deals with the suggested lines of enquiry highlighted as well as providing a wider view of highways maintenance in Shropshire.

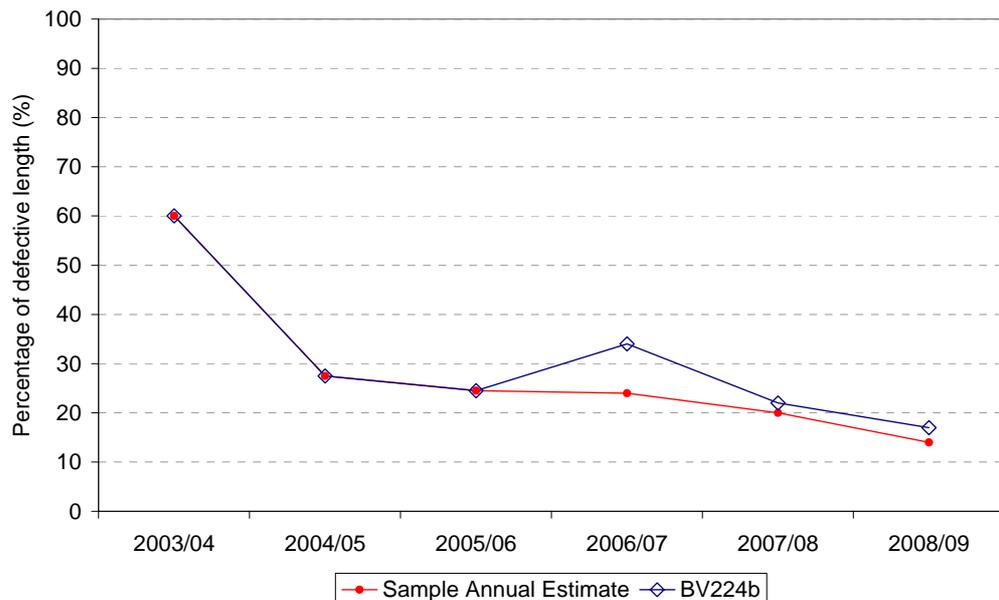
### Summary of concerns

3. The concerns can be summarised as:
  - The long-term maintenance and condition of rural roads.
  - Damage to the highway and verge caused by agricultural vehicles and heavy good vehicles
  - Water on the surface leads to surface erosion which is accelerated in winter.

- Patching and dressing are a short term treatments which are being carried out at the expense of long-term maintenance.

### Responses to the suggested lines of enquiry

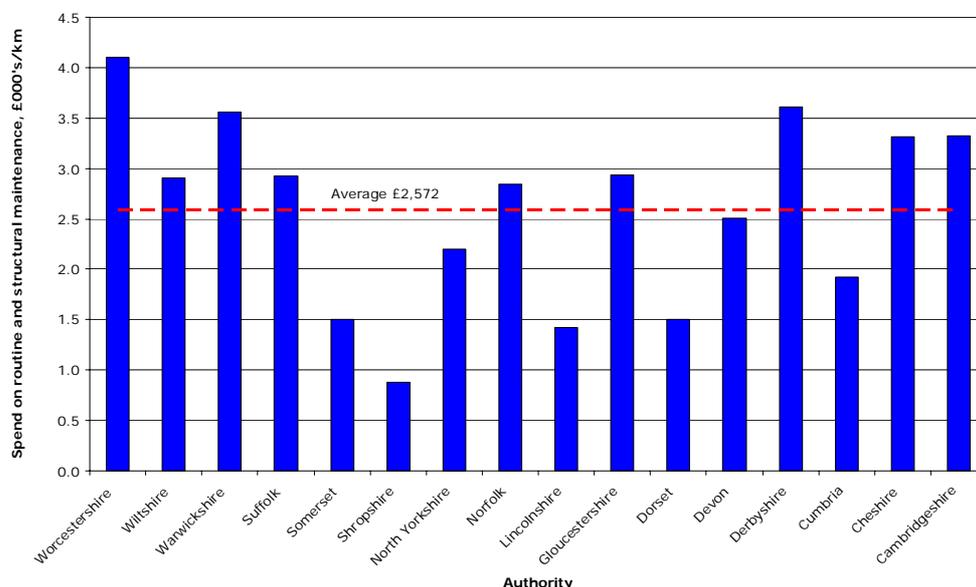
- 4. Is there objective evidence from tests and inspection to confirm or refute the concerns expressed?**
5. Until 2008/09, the council were required to report on the condition of unclassified roads, labelled as BVPI 224b. As unclassified roads form almost half (46%) of the entire road length, we have continued to monitor this indicator, using the same methods, as an essential part of managing the overall condition of the highway. 75% of unclassified roads in Shropshire are rural; therefore this indicator might provide evidence of condition in the areas of concern.
6. In 2006/07, the method of reporting BVPI224b changed from an annual sample on 25% of the network to reporting data for 100% of the network using data up to four years old. Figure 1 provides the actual reported BVPI 224b value as well as the sample annual estimate which continues the long term trend. The 2009/10 results were not available at the time of writing.



**Figure 1. Condition indicators for Unclassified Roads.**

7. Figure 1 indicates that the condition of unclassified roads has improved every year between 2003/04 and 2008/09. The condition of unclassified roads is assessed by a visual inspection of apparent defects; such inspections do not assess the structural condition of the road nor do they assess other qualities such as ride comfort or aesthetics.
- 8. Is the problem confined to Craven Arms and Rural LJC area or a wider rural problem?**

9. Analysis of the condition of the county's roads has not highlighted the Craven Arms and Rural LJC area as an area of concern. Indeed the condition of the network as a whole, as measured by nationally agreed methods, indicates that areas of poor condition are dispersed throughout the county.
10. **Is the Council getting the best value it can from existing arrangements between its highways management and contractors?**
11. The majority of small works are carried out under a term maintenance contract. This contract is competitively tendered and is due for retendering next year. The performance of this contract is monitored on a monthly basis using a suite of Key Performance Indicators. Large works, worth in excess of £100,000, are individually tendered with local contractors to provide the best price.
12. **Are the resources available for highway maintenance more or less (per road mile) than in neighbouring rural counties?**
13. The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) collects information on the budgets of local authorities each year. CIPFA has compared our budget for maintaining non-principal roads (B Roads, C Roads and Unclassified Roads) with other near-neighbour authorities. Our near-neighbour set of authorities are considered to have similar characteristics such as the balance between urban and rural areas.



**Figure 2. Expenditure on Non-Principal Roads per km**

14. Figure 2 shows that the expenditure in Shropshire on maintaining each km of its network compared to the near-neighbour group. In 2008/09 the average expenditure for the group was £2,572 per km; Shropshire spent £881 per km, the lowest amount in the near-neighbour group.

- 15. Is the allocation of highways budget fair and commensurate with need as between maintenance of rural and urban roads and between highways divisions within Shropshire?**
16. The budgets for maintenance are allocated using an inventory of road features such as length, road type and other features such as gullies, lines etc. Investment on specific schemes on the Principal road network is prioritised in order to maximise their value against the Council aims.
- 17. What long term plans are there for rural road improvement?**
18. Our funding does not enable us to maintain a high standard of condition on every road in the County. Our aim has been to maintain the network in a condition that is suitable for its use. Our strategy has been as follows:
- A. Principal Roads will remain a priority and we will continue to keep this vital asset in its current very good condition.
  - B. For Non-Principal Roads, our maintenance will be targeted towards dealing with areas of network in fair condition as well as areas in poor condition.
  - C. The Non-Principal Unclassified Roads will continue to be maintained in a safe condition. A programme of surface dressing works will maintain the surface and protect the road from water ingress.
  - D. Footways are to be maintained in a safe condition with continued targeting of maintenance works at the poorer sections of the network.
- 19. Are the costs of running repairs eroding proper provision for long-term rural road improvements?**
20. The Council has a duty to repair defects which are a hazard to highway users. Consequently, such expenditure will always be required; however, it is good practice to keep this figure as low. In 2008/09, the Council spent £722,000 on potholes and safety defects compared to a total budget for works of £12.4 Million (6%).
21. The amount spent on maintaining safety defects is only a fraction of the estimated deficit in the budget and therefore this is not preventing the maintenance of rural roads.
22. The highway maintenance strategy has been produced by considering the whole life costs of treatments. For many rural roads, patching and surface dressing has been shown to provide a lower whole life cost than other methods of renewing the surface. Given the above deficit, it remains the most cost-effective method of preserving our road network, see point 28 below, and is part of our long-term maintenance plan.

- 23. Are there actions that could be taken to reduce heavy traffic on rural roads?**
24. The use of Heavy Goods Vehicles has become more attractive due to increased regulation and changes in the logistics industry. While the use of these vehicles causes damage to the network, they also contribute to the wider economy. It is possible for the Council to regulate the use of certain roads where there is insufficient capacity or significant blight; however, this is not possible for the whole county.
25. We have been attempting to establish communication links with digital mapping companies in order to improve satellite navigation systems. These efforts have so far been thwarted by legal restrictions imposed on us by Ordnance Survey.
- 26. Can more be done to improve drainage?**
27. Following the recommendations of the Pitt Review, we have begun improving our systems for Flood and Water Management. This will require us to take a strategic view of all types of drainage including highway and land drainage, so that our communities are more resilient.
28. Water on the carriageway does not normally lead to surface erosion unless it penetrates the structure of the road. Highway drainage is intended to prevent this. Such damage is exacerbated when ice forms, accelerating the damage and leading to potholes. Regular dressing to seal the surfacing and cleaning the gullies are amongst the most efficient methods to prevent this damage.
- 29. What is the likely order of cost of a remedial programme?**
30. A maintenance backlog was calculated in 2008 to return the network to a good overall condition. This would result in a typical 15 year programme of work and would cost in the region of £50 million. Given the improvement in road condition over the last number of years, this investment is not considered justified – especially as we move towards a tough spending round.
- 31. Is there a need to identify rural routes for priority attention?**
32. The strategy outlined above would identify actions according to the use of the road rather than its situation. The method of allocating the budget, which takes into account inventory, is sufficient to ensure that rural routes receive a fair share of the available funding.
- 33. How should Council seek to engage with central government for increased funding to address these issues?**
34. All Unitary, Metropolitan and County Council's will soon be required to produce a valuation of the highway asset as part of their published accounts. It is expected that the gross value of this asset will be significant. This valuation will be made using a nationally agreed methodology and will identify both the scale of the asset and the

current level of depreciation. These figures will help steer Central Government and Local Government towards the adequate provision of funding for its asset.

### Analysis of concerns

35. The Council is using the most prudent methods of maintenance to retain the condition of roads at low cost. These methods seal the road to prevent sudden defect occurring, they keep the highway user safe and preserve access. The highway network can be considered to be meeting on the elementary needs of the users: to get them there safely. For other needs, such as aesthetics and comfort of ride, it is inadequate resulting in a perceived deterioration of the network.
36. The Council has been very successful in recent years in managing the condition of the road network with limited funding. Condition Indicators are maintained or improving. Much of this improvement is due to prompt repair of defects and the timely use of surface dressing to protect the road surface at low cost.
37. The long term implications on the structure of the road network cannot be fully seen. The life time of a road is measured in decades and therefore the impact of today's choices may not be apparent for some years. Likewise, remedial action in the future will be expensive and could also take decades to fully recover.
38. The elementary service provided by the highway network does not meet all the needs of our highway users. A safe and sound road can also be full of patches and bumpy. Aesthetics and ride quality are the most readily noticeable characteristics to the highway user. Such qualities are secondary requirements but these can have a large influence on the user's satisfaction.
39. Nevertheless, it is clear from Figure 1 that the condition of our unclassified roads has consistently improved over the last number of years.

<b>List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)</b>
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<b>Human Rights Act Appraisal</b>
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No conflict with the provisions of the Human Rights Act has been identified.
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<b>Environmental Appraisal</b>
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A deteriorating highway network will have a negative impact on the environment in Shropshire.
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<b>Risk Management Appraisal</b>
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N/A
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<b>Community / Consultations Appraisal</b>
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None
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**Cabinet Member**

Martin Taylor-Smith

**Local Member**

N/A

**Appendices**

None